River's sand could fill in lake beaches

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Could the Kankakee River's seemingly endless supply of sand help restore the eroding beaches of Lake Michigan?

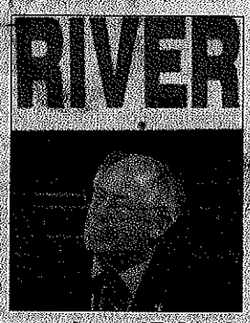
Unlikely as it might seem, the idea is worth considering, according to John Marlin, "The Mud Man from Peoria."

Marlin, a senior scientist with the state's waste management and research center, has already shown that "mud" dredged from the Illinois River at Peoria can provide habitat-restoring topsoil for new parklands at a now-defunct Chicago steel mill.

On Wednesday, he suggested that the Kankakee's sand supply might provide a practical resource for reviving eroding beaches along southern Lake Michigan.

Like the "mud" — sediment filling in Peoria Lakes on the Illinois, Marlin says the Kankakee's sand is simply "a resource out of place."

"It should not be considered as 'waste'; we should consider what it's good for, figure out where it can be used and wanted."



Journal/B Corbin

LT. GOV. PAT QUINN listens to reports on the Kankakee River during a Wednesday meeting of the Illinois River Coordinating Council at the Bradley-Bourbonnais Sportsman's Club.

Marlin was among the speakers at Wednesday's meeting of the Illinois River Coordinating Council at the Bradley-Bourbonnais Sportsman's Club. The council, chaired by Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn, came here to learn more about conditions on the Kankakee River.

Marlin's innovative "Mud to Parks" project could become a model for designing a practical program of sand removal on the Kankakee.

"We've moved 104,000 tons of mud from Peoria to Chicago," Marlin said, noting that this "resource out of place" is now providing topsoil for park development at the old U.S. Steel South Works site.

The "Mud to Parks" project found economic ways to overcome handling and transportation issues, Marlin said. Wet sediment dredged from Peoria Lakes was barged up the Illinois to Chicago.

"If we can get sand out of the Kankakee River on a regular basis we can increase the depth of Six-Mile Pool (between the dam at Kankakee and Aroma Park) and improve recreation," Marlin said.

He also noted that the sand building up at the state line is a "reasonably clean" resource. "I'm talking with several contractors about ways we could use this sand. If we can get it up north to Lake Michigan, it's possible it may be used for lake shore restoration."

Fluctuating water level in Lake Michigan in recent years has produced heavy beach erosion.

The key, Marlin said, is determining if river sand is suitable for environmental restoration or beach nourishment.

"There's no such thing as just 'sand,'" Marlin said. "River sand is generally called 'tumbled' sand with soft, smooth, loosely packed grains. Another type is called 'angular' sand that has sharp edges and tends to hold its shape. Some projects want smooth sand, others want angular."

Marlin added that river sand would also have to be analyzed to determine if any contaminants are present before it could be used.

The state already owns land on the north side of the Kankakee just west of State Line Road. "We have a storage area complete with levees, a paved road and a railroad nearby," Marlin said.